

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 006898

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/25/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: ROYAL COMMISSION PREPARING TO RELEASE "NATIONAL AGENDA"; CRITICAL RECEPTION LIKELY

REF: A. AMMAN 6612

[B](#). AMMAN 5230
[C](#). AMMAN 4125
[D](#). AMMAN 2427
[E](#). AMMAN 2378
[F](#). AMMAN 2043

Classified By: CDA Christopher Henzel for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: The Royal Commission charged by King Abdullah with drafting a National Agenda has nearly completed its work. Commission staff say 80% of the agenda's recommendations are approaching final form. There is still disagreement over a new elections law, however, with traditionalists fighting to keep the current system, which favors the East Bank minority. The King hopes to have a complete working document ready before traveling to the U.S. in mid-September. Amman's political class remains skeptical about the agenda, pointing to a lack of transparency and public input. The GOJ hopes to counter this sentiment with an intensive public relations campaign once the agenda is unveiled. The Commission's draft recommendations for a new political parties law are an improvement on a poorly-received draft law released in March. END SUMMARY.

APPROACHING THE FINISH LINE

[12.](#) (C) King Abdullah named a 26-member Royal Commission in February 2005 to draft a comprehensive "National Agenda" that would guide Jordan's development over the next ten years. The Commission is composed of a cross-section of prominent Jordanians, ranging from a conservative Islamist leader to a liberal community activist, and is overseen by the modernizing Deputy Prime Minister Marwan Muasher. The Commission has formed sub-committees and working groups that include outside experts and private citizens to examine specific subject areas (ref E). Meetings of the Commission and related groups are not open to the public; most of the work to date on the National Agenda has similarly been kept out of the press. Except for a few MPs on the Commission or its working groups, Parliament has not been consulted or involved in the National Agenda process. Another commission appointed by the palace in January 2005 is separately working on a decentralization plan to divide Jordan into three regions, each with its own legislature (ref F). This commission, dominated by former ministers and old guard politicians, is reportedly keen on using decentralization to maintain East Banker political power.

[13.](#) (C) Ashraf Zeitoon, personal assistant to Deputy PM Muasher, provided poloff during two recent meetings with an update on the Commission's work in drafting the National Agenda. According to Zeitoon, approximately 80% of the agenda's recommendations have been or are currently being drafted following the completion of substantive discussions and study on relevant subject areas. Some of these recommendations were "easy" to reach, he stated, while others resulted only after considerable debate. Zeitoon added that he had initially been skeptical about the National Agenda, given that traditionalist forces had "won too many battles" in past reform attempts, but was now strongly encouraged by what he had seen. Muasher hopes to complete a working draft for King Abdullah prior to the King's trip to the U.S. in mid-September, with a finished product ready for public release at the end of that month.

[14.](#) (C) Despite the progress that has been made, Zeitoon said that there was still serious disagreement regarding electoral law reform. East Bank hard-liners inside the Commission intent on preserving the status quo were firmly resisting any major changes to the existing system of electoral districts that over-represent rural and tribal areas at the expense of the urbanized Palestinian-Jordanian majority. Reformers were equally intent on giving voters a broader choice of candidates on the national level, but "without giving away the store to the Islamists" who would probably do very well if a new system rewarded nationally-organized slates. Zeitoon said he was confident that a recommendation for meaningful electoral reform would ultimately be achieved as the King and the GOJ know all too well that the National Agenda could be roundly derided if it failed to move the country toward more representative politics. Zeitoon said Muasher will seek a consensus within the Commission in

support of the recommendations, but if that is not possible, he is confident that a majority will vote for the package that is now taking shape. The challenge would then be to dissuade opposition members from going public with their objections.

15. (C) Zeitoon further noted that the commission appointed by King Abdullah to draft a decentralization plan was also considering the subject of national electoral reform in the context of creating regional parliaments. This commission would likely reach a recommendation on elections at odds with that of the National Agenda, potentially resulting in a very awkward situation for the GOJ. Zeitoon said that only the King would be able to step in to prevent this from happening.

PUBLIC DOUBTS

16. (C) The comments of our contacts from across the political and ethnic spectrum reveal widespread skepticism regarding the National Agenda. Much of this stems from a lack of transparency. Almost all meetings of the Commission and working groups are held behind closed doors, and there have been no public briefings on the agenda since Muasher's statements at a press conference in June (ref B). Several newspaper editors, for example, have recently complained to PAO that despite the approaching September deadline, they have heard nothing about the Commission's possible recommendations. (NOTE: Muasher granted a brief joint interview to two Arabic dailies on August 24 in which he stated that National Agenda conclusions would be published in the end of September, with a "workshop" to discuss agenda topics tentatively scheduled for September 9 and 10. He also confirmed that no "vision" had yet been reached on a new elections law. END NOTE.) Similarly, the Speaker of the lower house of parliament, Abdul Hadi Majali, griped to Charge and A/DCM August 18 that MPSS (including those on National Agenda committees) had been relegated to the sidelines, even though they will be expected to approve legislation implementing whatever the Commission recommends.

17. (C) When asked about transparency concerns, Zeitoon defended the National Agenda process as being truly representative of differing viewpoints in Jordan, pointing to the clash on electoral reform as proof that the GOJ wasn't simply dictating the outcomes. He nevertheless acknowledged that drumming up broad public support for the National Agenda would be a difficult task. Consequently, the government was preparing a "major marketing campaign," to include "roadshows" in each of the country's governorates, to sell the benefits of the National Agenda to Jordanians. (NOTE: On August 24, a contact in the Royal Court rejected criticism over the lack of transparency, telling PAO that the National Agenda was not meant to be a "national convention," but a means to implement the King's will. He added that transparency and discussion would come after the agenda was published. END NOTE.)

HOPE FOR POLITICAL PARTIES?

18. (C) As an example of the progress made on the National Agenda, Zeitoon shared with poloff draft recommendations for new laws regulating political parties. These recommendations (although not yet final) represent an attempt to address the severe criticism which party leaders launched against a draft political parties law unveiled by the GOJ in March 2005 (ref D). While the recommendations still include the principle of public funding long demanded by parties, it drops express prohibitions against "interference" in the affairs of other states or "harming" Jordan's relations with other countries. (NOTE: Political parties would still be subject to provisions of the constitution that give the government powers to control activities that threaten "public order." END NOTE.) In contrast to the March draft law's ban on the use of clubs or charities by political organizations, the recommendations allow recognized parties to establish charities and clubs, in addition to research and polling centers. Burdensome government oversight requirements that were in the draft law are also considerably eased.

COMMENT

19. (C) Although the bulk of the work on the National Agenda may be complete, the most controversial issues remain. If no consensus can be reached on electoral reform, the aggrieved party (or parties) could attempt to sabotage the document even before its formal unveiling. A parliament dominated by traditionalist East Bankers will balk at recommendations that threaten their hold on political power, and in the current

environment of fiscal belt-tightening it will be hard to buy much support with pork-barrel projects. Thus, despite King Abdullah's August 17 address to Jordanian politicians, in which he expressed exasperation at the frequency with which he was required to intervene in Jordanian politics (ref A), the King will probably have to engage personally if the National Agenda is to advance political reform.

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